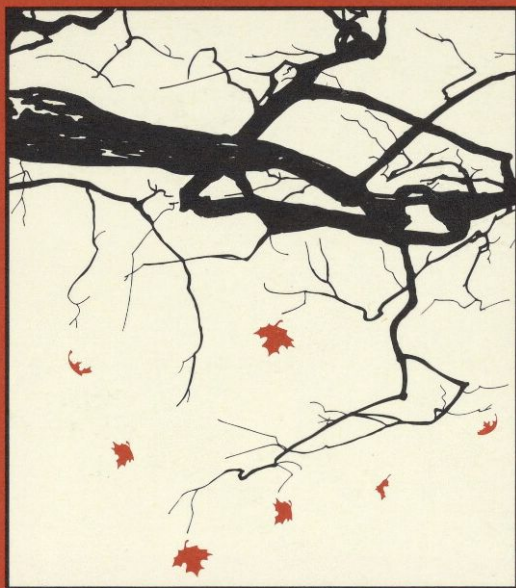


# THE MIND'S EYE

A Liberal Arts Journal  
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts



**Robert Penn Warren: On the Dark Side of Creation** *By Mark Daniel Miller*

**The Portrait** *By Ben Jacques*

**William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal":  
A Folklorist's View** *By Mary Ellen Cohane*

**Buying Eggs at the Half Way House** *Poetry By Jan Myskowski*

**At Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum:  
Looking For Myself In Hyperspace** *Review By Bonnie Bishoff*

**In a Seashell Box** *Poetry By Paul LeSage*

**Fall 1998**



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## *The Editor's File*

It is indeed a pleasure to introduce this Fall 1998 edition of *The Mind's Eye*. Featured is the work of several authors, all of whom have something special to offer. Mark Miller favors us with another piece, this time his award-winning presentation for the Faculty Lecture Series on the life and work of Robert Penn Warren. Mary Ellen Cohane demonstrates a remarkable versatility. After "The Gift of the Falcon"—a humorous interlude for the 1998 Spring edition—she presents here a scholarly analysis of William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." Adding to these distinguished contributions, Paul LeSage and Jan Myskowski provide two poems, and Ben Jacques—currently on sabbatical leave—displays his observation of character with "The Portrait." As the first alumnus published in *The Mind's Eye*, Jan Myskowski expands the journal's author base. Finally, the Review section retains its lively prose with Bonnie Bishoff's personal encounter "At Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum." As we congratulate and feature the work of these authors, *The Mind's Eye* continues to accept submissions. The deadline for the Spring 1999 edition is January 15.

# Robert Penn Warren On the Dark Side of Creation

BY MARK DANIEL MILLER

My general subject is the conflict between art and life, between the artist—in this case, the writer—and his or her world; and my specific subject is this conflict in the life and work of the twentieth-century American author, Robert Penn Warren. Since not everyone is an artist, I begin with a definition of the problem, a description of the life/art conflict. Besides, even if you *are* an artist and are, thus, a sort of walking casualty of this conflict, you may not understand what hit you, and you may be wondering what to do next. I am not offering any solutions here, nor does Warren. As he has said any number of times, each individual has to work out his or her own salvation. But I am offering, first, a definition of the problem and, second, the example of Warren—how he understood and tried to cope with the life/art conflict—and this you may find salutary in some small way.

Why Robert Penn Warren? His accomplishments as an artist and as a critic are formidable: seventeen volumes of poetry, ten novels (plus two unpublished), a collection of short fiction, several plays, a biography, two studies of race relations in America, two children's books, several books combining history and cultural criticism, and a massive body of work on other writers, including shared authorship of several textbooks which revolutionized the teaching of literature in America. Our first poet laureate, Warren was also clearly a true man

of letters—the only American, for instance, to have won the Pulitzer Prize in both fiction and poetry, for which he won it twice. But Warren was not only an artist; he also commented at length on *being* an artist, on the place of the artist in the modern world, particularly in America; and he did so not only in his own works, but also in dozens of interviews granted over the years. Thus, Warren seems a particularly promising specific subject on which to focus our attention (and besides, he's the writer whose work I know best).

To begin defining the life/art conflict, consider a pair of statements by Warren from a 1969 interview with Richard B. Sale, statements which I also use as a handout in my Creative Writing: Poetry class. Here, Warren identifies two requirements for writing poetry which are almost guaranteed to put the poet at odds with his or her world: first, the achievement of a state of being which Warren calls "passivity" or "prayerful . . . 'waitingness'"; and, second, "time": time for achieving the passive state; time to write. Here are Warren's statements:

Warren: But to poetry. You have to be willing to waste time. When you start a poem, stay with it and suffer through it and just think about nothing, not even the poem. Just be there. It's more of a prayerful state than writing the novels is. A lot of the novel is in doing good works, as it were, not praying. And the prayerful state is just being passive with it, mumbling, being around there, lying on the grass, going swimming, you see. Even getting drunk. Get drunk prayerfully, though.

Sale: Then you had the kind of life in recent years where you could do this, when you chose. Is that correct? Or is there always limited time?

Warren: Well, if you can't do it that way, you'd better not try. If something seems to be there to rob, always rob Peter to pay Paul. If anybody's going to be a writer, he's got to be

able to say, "This has got to come first, to write has to come first." That is, if you have a job, you have to scant your job a little bit. You can't be an industrious apprentice if you're going to be a poet. You've got to pretend to be an industrious apprentice but really steal time from the boss. Or from your wife, or somebody, you see. The time's got to come from somewhere. And also this passivity, this "waitingness," has to be achieved some way. It can't be treated as a job. It's got to be treated as a non-job or an anti-job.

(Talking 121)

Lest we think that Warren is alone in his description of the life versus art conflict, here is a *poetic* version of the same thing, from the poem "Adam's Curse" by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats. I also use this as a handout in my poetry writing class:

... 'A line will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.  
Better go down upon your marrow-bones  
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones  
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;  
For to articulate sweet sounds together  
Is to work harder than all these, and yet  
Be thought an idler by the noisy set  
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen  
The martyrs call the world.' ...

(Yeats 78)

Implied here is also a general scorn on the part of the world for the end-product of the poet's efforts: the poem.

We could multiply such examples: Walt Whitman defiantly rejecting the prevailing values of his time—and of ours—by beginning *Song of Myself*, "I loafe and invite my soul"; William Saroyan asserting, "My real work is being"; T. S. Eliot, in part 3 of "Burnt Norton," describing faces "Distracted from distraction by distraction." But the

point is clear: the writer, particularly the poet and particularly in the modern era, feels alienated from society, at odds with the world—a victim of the conflict between life and art. Warren was no different, and I would argue that this fact is a large part of what darkened his artistic vision even long after its apparent brightening in the early fifties.

In an interview with Warren published in 1977, Peter Stitt poses the following question:

Since the fifties your poetry has been mostly optimistic and affirmative, emphasizing the glory of the world and its promises. And yet you also have poems on ugliness, death, racial violence, and so on. How do these poems fit into your vision?

"That's all part of the picture," Warren responds, just the other side of it. You have people like Dreiser, who are monsters humanly but who make great things. There is Flaubert, whose main goal in going to Egypt was to get the clap, and yet he had this inspiration for *Madame Bovary*, and he thanks God to be alive, approaching the curve of the wave. It is the complication of life—nothing more complicated than that. (Talking 244-245)

Now, in one sense, this is the response we would expect from Warren, a man who spent his entire life trying to show both sides of "the picture." In his response to Stitt, he clearly says that his poetic vision includes the pessimistic and negative because an entirely optimistic and affirmative vision would over-simplify the true complication of life and would therefore be false.

However, in the lives of the two men he cites as examples—the authors Theodore Dreiser and Gustave Flaubert—we have, despite Warren's words to the contrary, something a bit more complicated than the complication of life; we have the complication of life versus art. Warren is concerned here with a sort of corollary of the life/art conflict as we have defined it thus far: the fact that people who are "monsters humanly" can nevertheless "make great things," but it is telling, I think, that he cites these *literary artists* in response to a question about the dark side of his *own* poetic vision. By all accounts, Warren was anything but a "monster" in his own, personal life, but he was always fascinated with the writer such as Dreiser whose career, as

Warren says in his book about him, "raises in a peculiarly poignant form the question of the relation of life and art" (*Homage* 9). In particular, Warren seems to have experienced in his own life the truth of an irony best expressed by yet another such writer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his great poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: the fact that though the writer—in Coleridge's poem, the Mariner—"brings the word which is salvation, he cannot quite save himself and taste the full joy of the fellowship [of all things] he advertises. Society looks askance at him" ("Pure Imagination" 257). He is, as Warren says in his essay on *The Ancient Mariner*, the "poète maudit"—the cursed poet. Some causes of the poet's estrangement from society we have already seen. But the matter, predictably, is even more complicated than I have suggested thus far. We shall explore it shortly. However, the basic paradox is this: the very qualities and behaviors which enable the writer to "see into the life of things" are also the qualities and behaviors which cut him or her off from that life, even to the point of a kind of suicide. And this predicament, the predicament of the "poète maudit," would continue to haunt Warren apparently till the end of his life.

Two points before I proceed. First, if I myself am presenting here only one side of the picture, the dark side, that is because I have already presented the other side, in an essay published in *The Mississippi Quarterly* in the Winter of 1994-95 and entitled, "Faith in Good Works: The Salvation of Robert Penn Warren." In that essay, I argue that the decade-long "drought" of short poems Warren underwent from 1944 to 1954 was a symptom of his own sick soul, an index of his own need for salvation, and that in the long, experimental works he turned to in these years, we have, as Warren says of Coleridge and *The Ancient Mariner*, "the case of a man who saves his own soul by composing a poem"—or, in the case of Warren, by composing a novel that began as poetry, *All the King's Men*; *A Tale in Verse and Voices*, the book-length poem, *Brother to Dragons*; and a second, highly experimental novel, *World Enough and Time* ("Pure Imagination" 254). However, at the end of my essay, I indicate that the salvation was not final or complete, in part because the complication of life ensures that "[t]he victory is never won, the redemption must be continually re-earned" ("Pure and Impure Poetry" 54), but also because Warren continued to be haunted by the just-described predicament of the writer. The writing which was his salvation was also a curse.

Second, in the argument to follow, I will be careful, as Warren



himself always is, to distinguish between those things which he claims are true for writers and writing in general, and those things which he says are true only for himself. Of course, there is some overlap between these things, and it is with such an overlap that I wish to begin.

In his 1997 biography of Robert Penn Warren, Joseph Blotner relates a description of Warren at work which in many ways sums up the whole conflict of life versus art, the *tension* between writing and living. In the Summer of 1971, James Glickman, a former student of Warren's, was employed by the family at their home in Stratton, Vermont, as a sort of general helper, and he was able to observe Warren at work on poems. "When he was in the midst of one," recalls Glickman,

"his face took on an extraordinarily meditative quality—cheeks sunken, eyes downcast--and he would be completely absent from whatever was going on around him. [His wife] Eleanor would sometimes remind him to be polite if someone were talking to him or had asked him something. He would summon himself out of whatever reverie he was in, looking like someone who was swimming to light from a deep watery element, at last breaking the surface, then saying he was sorry, smiling and 'being polite.' A few minutes later, he would be back where he had begun." (Blotner 394)

Of course, this would be at lunchtime, an hour preceded by a long period of physical exercise before breakfast—bar weights and swimming—and about four hours of solitary work in the cabin perched on the hillside overlooking the stream that runs through the property. "After having one sherry and an hour's break to eat," Glickman says of Warren, "he would head back to his cabin and come back about five o'clock or so. He then would grab a stick, call for [the dogs] Joey and Frodo, and go for a five-mile walk up Mountain Road.' Then there would be drinks on the porch at sun set, dinner at eight, reading, and bed." (Blotner 394).

Now what is most notable about Glickman's description—aside from the fact that Warren was *in a position* to devote such long hours to writing—is, first, the fact that Warren spent so many hours alone, and second, the fact that, even when he was with people, he would, if he was hot on a poem, "be completely absent from whatever was

going on around him." In various interviews over the years, Warren repeatedly said that writing was, for him, "a way of life" (*Talking* 132, 228, 370), but as Glickman's description shows, it was a way of life that was, in one sense, at odds with life. Indeed, to be "completely absent" from what is going on around you is, in one sense, to be dead, and yet this very power—the power of the imagination—is what enables the writer to write.

Early on in his career, Warren pondered this distinguishing characteristic of the writer via his work on the English Romantics, particularly Coleridge. In his 1945 essay on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading," Warren quotes that portion of William Wordsworth's "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*" in which Wordsworth, according to Warren, "says, first, that the poet has a 'more comprehensive soul' than other men, and second, that he is set off from them by a certain special endowment. The first notion," explains Warren, "refers to a difference in degree, but the second refers to a *difference in kind*. In developing this second notion," Warren observes, "Wordsworth, like other Romantic critics, comments on the special nature of the aesthetic experience:"

the poet has, [Wordsworth] says in the Preface, an "ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet . . . do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves. . . ." ("Pure Imagination" 260; emphases Warren's)

Warren might also have quoted the phrase just prior to the one he does quote, the phrase where Wordsworth says that the poet has "a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present" (Wordsworth 453). Had he done so, then I would have been able to make this clever observation: it is this "disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present" which at times causes the writer to be "completely absent" from present things.

And what are these "absent things" that so occupy the writer's attention? Well, the main thing would be whatever the writer is working on, for until he or she creates it, the poem, story, play, or whatever can be said to be absent, or to be present only in the

writer's mind. However, this absent thing consists in turn of any number of other absent things: words, images, rhythms, scenes, characters, ideas—in short, any and all of the things that will eventually go to make up the finished work. And these things may in turn consist of any number of absent things from the writer's own experience—times, places, people, events, dreams—all different from the particular things which are currently present. The absent things which occupy the writer's attention may also be wholly imaginary, or may be complex amalgams of the known or remembered and the imagined: what was and what might have been; what is (but is absent) and what may be.

Indeed, once some present thing summons the writer from his or her creative reverie and its welter of absent things—as I write this sentence, I am summoned from my own creative reverie by the laughter of my three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, who wants me to see the sprinkles and chocolate she has gotten on her nose from eating a doughnut—there is no reason that the writer can't incorporate that present thing, if it fits, into the developing pattern of the work of art which is the main object of his or her attention. This is, in fact, precisely what Warren did when he began writing poems again after the ten-year drought. In the interview with Stitt, Warren describes the poems in *Promises*, the first volume after the drought, as combinations of "memories and natural events" in the present. When the drought broke, the Warrens were living in Italy with their children, in a ruined sixteenth-century fortress on the Mediterranean, and according to Warren, the poems he wrote at that time

wander back and forth from my boyhood to my children. Seeing a little golden-headed girl on that bloody spot of history is an event. With the bay beyond, the sea beyond that, the white butterflies, that's all a natural event. (Talking 239)

Combining the history suggested by the fortress, Warren's memories of his own personal history, and the experiences of the present, including those of the children, the poems become "one package," Warren says in a 1978 interview, "contrast and identity in one package—change and continuity—the human story" (*Talking* 332).

Given the potency, indeed the *vitality* of these "absent things" which are the objects of the writer's creative reverie—Warren himself was wont to call them his "vital images" (*Talking* 14, 331)—perhaps

writing as a way of life is not so at odds with life after all. In fact, far from being a kind of death, perhaps the writer's estranging reverie is as satisfactory a way of life as life itself. After all, "... the satisfaction of living," according to Warren, "is feeling you're living significantly," and writing is, as he says, "a way of existing meaningfully as much of your time as possible" (*Talking* 212, 370). This is because it is, like philosophy, "a way of thinking about your life as you live," "a way of making your own life make sense to you" (*Talking* 187, 212), though it is not, like philosophy, abstract. Rather, it is "an imaginative involvement in experience," an imaginative "enactment" in which "... the imagination takes the place of literal living . . . by moving toward values and modifying, testing, and exfoliating older values" (*Talking* 82, 305, 171-172). According to Warren, the process of composing a work of literature is the process of "knowing what kind of person you can be, getting your reality shaped a little bit better" (*Talking* 16). It is the "process of trying to find your way into your own life and life in general," of "trying to give shape to experience" and "to know the self" (*Talking* 132-133, 212, 228). It is a way "of exploring the self and the world" (*Talking* 294). In this sense, writing is not at all an act which cuts the writer off from the world but, rather, is "a way of being open to the world, a way of being open to experience" (*Talking* 370). And the finished work itself is "an image of the possibility of meaning in life" or "a metaphor for meaning," "an image of the possibility of meaning growing from experience—an image, that is, of our continuous effort to make sense of our lives" (*Talking* 82-83). As Warren says at the end of the essay "Knowledge and the Image of Man," the form of the finished work "is not a thing detached from the world but a thing springing from the deep engagement of spirit with the world," and its very rhythm "is, as it were, a myth of order, or fulfillment, an affirmation that our being may move in its totality toward meaning" ("Knowledge" 245-246).

In these latter quotations from "Knowledge and the Image of Man" and, just prior to these, in the pastiche of quotations drawn from various interviews with Warren conducted over the years, we can see that Warren feels there is a vital connection between writing and life. As he said in 1956 during the Fugitives' Reunion at Vanderbilt University, the process of writing a work of literature "is clearly something that refers to all of your living in indirect and complicated ways" (16).

However, it is also clearly something *separate* from living and something that *clashes* with living, if we are to judge by still other comments by Warren. For instance, in the interview with David Farrell in which he says that poetry is "a way of existing meaningfully as much of your time as possible," Warren adds, as a sort of sarcastic punchline, "And that's never much" (*Talking* 370). It is never much because, as Warren says at the end of the *Mariner* essay, "... we conduct most of our living ... [on] the superficial level" (*Pure Imagination* 272)—on the level of bills, dishes, household trash, laundry, housecleaning, sleep, and the like; on the level, that is, of practical and, even, animal necessity. (This is a list, by the way, of all the things I ignored while I was writing this paper.) Obviously, the idea of entirely eschewing this sort of life and of letting the imagination entirely take the place of literal living is absurd. However, even the *tendency* to do that—which is the tendency of the writer—could obviously cause conflicts in, say, a marriage in which the spouse of the writer is content to live at a more superficial level. But even if the spouse wishes to live significantly in some *other* way—Warren is always careful to say that writing is *a* way of living significantly, with the clear implication that there are, indeed, *other* ways—then there may be conflict. Suppose the spouse's idea of living significantly is to be active in some large community, for instance; this need may clash with the writer's need to be alone. Even if the spouse is generally tolerant of the writer's estranging reveries, there may be times—during a given lunch hour, for instance—when he or she grows weary of a spouse "completely absent from whatever is going on" around them.

In the interview with Sale conducted in 1969, Warren offers the following anecdote to illustrate the fact that, if you want to be a writer and a partner, you must face, as Warren puts it, "the problem of what *kind* of life you can subject other people to":

I know a young man—he's not young any longer—who shall be nameless. An extraordinary, talented writer, he married the wrong girl. Well, he's had a great success at life. But I know him well, and he sat there and told me, "I just can't do it. It's killing her. She's gonna leave me. I know it. It's gonna happen. She can't take it." She married a man when he was in a military uniform and was a heroic young man. And suddenly he put on those old clothes and locked

the door to write. It was different, and she couldn't take it. So he quit writing and has made a great success of another kind of life. (Talking 123)

In his second wife, author Eleanor Clark, Warren himself found a woman who not only understood his passion but also nurtured it. He was not so fortunate in his first wife.

Having introduced the subject, I now want to look more closely at the particulars of Warren's life, at the origin of his desire to be a writer and at his early experience of the life/art conflict. However, I should point out that, though we have Warren's work and, to some degree, the observations of others to use as evidence, our conclusions will in part be speculations. For we are looking here at the secret wellsprings of action, at obscure trains of psychic cause and effect: things that remained mysterious even to Warren himself. What seems generally to be true, however, is that Warren remained troubled by certain aspects of being a writer well into his late years and that this fact accounts for some of the darkness in his work.

In a *New York Times Book Review* article published four years before his death and entitled "'Poetry is a Kind of Unconscious Autobiography,'" Warren describes a practice he learned as a boy, before he began to write poetry, which later "became important to me," he says, "as a gateway to poetry." His best childhood friend, Kent Greenfield, was "a natural born woodsman" who, in the woods, "had the strange habit of suddenly stopping stock still, one foot almost poised, as he seemed to listen for every sound or stared at some object—some tree or whatever. He seemed to sink for a moment into the world around him. I so admired his skills," Warren confesses, "that I unconsciously began to imitate him." Warren could practice these skills during, as he puts it, "my country summers at my bookish old grandfather's remote farm." And when he began writing poetry during college, he found some of it "coming out of" these summers ("Unconscious Autobiography" 9).

But the art of stillness he had learned from Kent Greenfield went deeper than that. Later in the *New York Times Book Review* article, Warren describes again the "new way of seeing things" that ended the ten-year drought of short poems during the late forties and early fifties. The language of his description will sound familiar to us. The poems, he says, were

a different kind, of the glittering present and of, often, vivid

moments of the past newly discovered. . . . [I]n poem after poem an action or event seemed at the core, as having happened, or being about to happen. Or a scene that demanded an action, or a recollection that stirred something vital. There was no pattern in the way in which such things happened, but always with a sense of new expectation, of significance about to be revealed. ("Unconscious Autobiography" 10)

"Significance about to be revealed." This, as we have seen, is the lure and promise of the writer's creative reverie, and it is also what reminded Warren, when he first began trying to write poetry in college, of the art of stillness he had learned from Kent and of the solitude of his grandfather's farm. ". . . I sensed," he says,

some continuity between the need to be alone, with what was in your head—or wasn't there yet—and the aloneness of woods and canebrakes of my grandfather's farm years before, when diving deep, or standing in breathless silence to stare at something—as my old friend had done in the woods. What you stared at now was, however, the empty space on a sheet of paper which the right word would not come to fill. ("Unconscious Autobiography" 9)

Later, after discovering the new way to write poetry which ended the drought, Warren noted that

. . . the process, more than once, suggested some connection with the old woodland and canebrake wanderings of childhood or youth, or later years in foreign places, and the sudden instinctive motionlessness that might come as I idiotically stared at whatever it happened to be, tree or stone or bird rising. Whatever it was, it, for a moment anyway, would seem a strange event, blindly significant. ("Unconscious Autobiography" 10)

" . . . I feel an immanence of meaning in things," Warren says in the interview with Stitt (*Talking* 243), the *a* in *immanence* clearly interchangeable with an *i*; and whether these things are the "absent things" of the writer's reverie or the "glittering present" things of the writer's here and now, Warren stops before them and stands stock still, poised for the apocalypse of meaning.

The stance or attitude assumed by the speaker in any number of



Warren's poems, this attentive stillness may be said to betoken an *openness* to experience, the sort of openness which Warren says is a quality of writing. However, because it is a *stillness*, a stoppage, it is also a sort of death. This duality is apparent in the term Warren himself used to describe this attitude: "blankness" (*Talking* 122, 176). The editors of *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* suggest that this blankness is like John Keats's "negative capability": a selfless receptivity to experience (*Talking* 176; 402, n. 23). However, "blankness" may also be emptiness or, as Warren puts it in the *New York Times Book Review* article, a "deprivation" and a "void." In that piece, Warren says the following about his earlier efforts at becoming a writer, shortly after his matriculation at Vanderbilt University:

There were, of course, a number of students of similar tastes and ambitions, and all the arguments were exciting. But sometimes I found it a lonely life, trying to write. It seemed to set one apart from life, to be, as it were, a sort of mystic deprivation, to create what can only be described as a psychic void that needed to be filled. Sometimes, paradoxically, it was as though the only way to be not lonely was to be alone. ("Unconscious Autobiography" 9)

Why did Warren feel this way about trying to write? We must turn to biography for help, but the evidence is contradictory, as we might expect.

In the Spring of 1921, when he was just sixteen, Warren certainly did not dream of being a poet some day. Rather, he dreamed of being "admiral of the Pacific Fleet," as he would put it in a 1982 interview (*Talking* 378), and to that end, he had managed to obtain an appointment to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. Then, one "balmy afternoon" as he lay on the grass on the other side of a high hedge near his house, his dream of being a naval officer was shattered: his younger brother, Thomas, was throwing pieces of coal from the driveway over the high hedge, and one of them "landed directly on his brother's left eye, knocking him unconscious." Warren would eventually lose that eye, and he immediately lost his appointment to Annapolis. In the Fall, he enrolled at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, "to become, he thought, a chemical engineer" (Blotner 30). There, his composition teacher, John Crowe Ransom, recognized his talent and encouraged it. Soon, Warren was a member of the Fugitive group and had taken up poetry in earnest.

Writing poetry, then—he had not yet taken up fiction—was in one sense Warren's attempt to fill the "psychic void" left when his dreams of a naval career were shattered. It was a compensation of sorts for that "deprivation" and for the other deprivation—the blindness of the left eye—which had led to it.

But it was also, particularly in these early years, an "escape," as Warren would put it in a letter of this time to Allen Tate (Blotner 45). It was a "refuge." Here is how Warren explains it in an interview with Farrell published in 1982. I quote at length:

. . . [T]hat first period of poetry . . . was so different from what I had set my life up to be; I mean, being a naval officer and all of that. But the poetry became so extraordinarily important to me. The reading of it and the trying to write it became simply matters of life and death to me. . . . This real sort of passion I got for poetry may have been due in large part to my fear of going blind at that time. I had been told that the injury to the first eye somehow would affect the other eye, you see . . . you could get sympathetic blindness. So I was watching for this and for a while using glasses on the other eye to protect it. And I got fits of depression during that period. I felt myself going blind. I was sort of, you know, watching, watching, watching . . . always aware of it. And my refuge became in a way the study of poetry and the writing of poetry. (Talking 363)

It was apparently not *enough* of a refuge, however, for it was during this time that Warren attempted suicide.

Suicide, of course, is the ultimate blankness, and the means by which Warren attempted his—lying on his back in bed with a chloroform-soaked towel over his face—seems to connect it with that effacement of self which is a part of the creative reverie. In "Warren Lying Down," a paper presented on April 21, 1995, at the Fifth Annual Meeting of The Robert Penn Warren Circle in Bowling Green, Kentucky, Fred Waage pointed out that there are not only many instances of the standing reverie in Warren's poetry, there are also a number of instances of what Waage called the "recumbent reverie." He also observed that the accident which took Warren's left eye was an instance of such a "recumbent reverie interrupted by gratuitous violence." The lesson of that life-altering incident must have been abundantly clear to Warren: we are all, at all times, thus open or

vulnerable to the world of contingency or accident.

In another instance of "recumbent reverie," this one in the poem "The Leaf" from the "Island of Summer" sequence in the volume *Incarnations*, the speaker opens himself to the world only to find "exacerbation" and arid disappointment:

... On that  
High place of stone I have lain down, the sun  
Beat, the small exacerbation  
Of dry bones was what my back, shirtless and bare,  
knew. . . .

.....

... I  
Have opened my mouth to the wind of the world like wine,  
I wanted  
To taste what the world is, wind dried up  
The live saliva of my tongue, my tongue  
Was like a dry leaf in my mouth. (25-26)

Here, blankness—or openness—is met with blankness: with dryness and death.

But the most disturbing instance of the "recumbent reverie" in Warren's work occurs in *Audubon*, in the scene where the protagonist is lying in the cabin of the frontier woman, knows she is about to murder him for his gold watch, and yet cannot bring himself to leap up and defend himself. He "knows," we are told, that "He has entered the dark hovel / In the forest where the trees have eyes," in "the tale / They told him when he was a child" and "the dream he had in childhood but never / Knew the end of, only / The scream" (11). He knows, too,

What he must do, do soon, and therefore  
Does not understand why now a lassitude  
Sweetens his limbs, or why, even in this moment  
Of fear—or is it fear?—the saliva  
In his mouth tastes sweet.

"Now, now!" the voice in his head cries out, but  
Everything seems far away, and small.

He cannot think what guilt unmans him, or  
Why he should find the punishment so precious. (12)

"I yearn for significance," Warren says in a 1976 interview with Bill Moyers (*Talking* 214), and here is either the ultimate significance or, possibly, the gateway to ultimate significance: death—the end of the story, or at least the end of *this* story. When the travelers burst in and save Audubon, he is, at one level, disappointed. "He thinks / That now he will never know the dream's ending" and later asks, "What has been denied me?" (13, 17)

In one sense, this episode is just another dramatization of a familiar Warren theme: the terrible pull of "the dream," the idea, the ideal, the promise of fulfillment. The frontier woman has her dream, too—Audubon's gold watch—and she is willing to commit murder to hold it in her hand. Audubon, for his part, wants to paint all the birds of North America and is willing to kill them to do that. But he is also an artist and, like Warren, a "yearner" (*Talking* 213, 243, 382), so he cherishes "the dream / Of a season past all seasons" (29). The stunning image of him which appears in the section entitled "Love and Knowledge" portrays him as scientist, artist, and priest all rolled into one: "Over a body held in his hand, his head was bowed low, / But not in grief" (30). The poem is thus about what the artist—Audubon and Warren—and, indeed, what *any* person is willing to do or to sacrifice in order to pursue his or her passion; for, as the opening lines of the book ask, ". . . what / Is man but his passion?" (3) Audubon is willing to forego riches, to be alone a lot, to be much away from his beloved wife Lucy.

And Warren? Well, we know his attitude from yet another "recumbent reverie" poem, "American Portrait: Old Style," the first poem in 1978's Pulitzer-Prize-winning volume, *Now and Then*. In the penultimate section of that poem, the speaker—Warren—lies down in the slight depression of an unmarked grave which he and "K"—Kent Greenfield—had used as a "trench" during their childhood games of warfare many years earlier. Lying in the trench, the speaker wonders "What it would be like to die, / . . . And know yourself dead lying under / The infinite motion of sky." Here is the concluding section:

But why should I lie here longer?  
I am not dead yet, though in years,  
And the world's way is yet long to go,  
And I love the world even in my anger,  
And love is a hard thing to outgrow. (7)

Then, as reported by Blotner, there are Warren's words to doctor and friend Tom Byrne, during one of their talks in the days just prior to Warren's death. "When Tom told Warren he was awed by what he had accomplished," according to Blotner, "[Warren] replied, 'It's nothing. What counts are family and friends'" (Blotner 497).

But of course, writing *did* matter to Warren, and he *did* sometimes discount family and friends. We remember his statement in the interview with Richard B. Sale, the statement I always read to the students in my poetry-writing class:

If anybody's going to be a writer, he's got to be able to say, "This has got to come first, to write has to come first." . . . You've got to . . . steal time from your wife, or somebody, you see. The time's got to come from somewhere. (Talking 121)

In this same interview, Warren also says:

. . . I think that everybody who means to be a writer should go through a short period, anyway, where he does not have everything done for him, by a foundation or something else. Where he actually has to suffer a little bit, just a little bit, mind you, just enough to know what it's like to steal the time to give up something, in some way. And to offend wife or child or mother or father or best friend. Just to do what he wants to do. Just to know this: that he is able to make this reservation in life. To know how to achieve this inner privacy. (Talking 122)

Warren is not being entirely sarcastic here; and where he is not, he is clearly speaking from painful experience.

In light of comments such as these, one wonders about Warren's relationship with his first wife, Cinina. She was mentally ill and alcoholic, so even if Warren had not been a writer, it would not be too surprising to learn that he felt tremendous guilt over her. But as he stole time from her and therefore offended her—which would have been inevitable since she was jealous and envious of his success—his guilt must have been compounded. His relationship with her must also have taught him something about salvation. During the drought period, he wrote the word which was salvation, and yet couldn't quite save himself—not only because he was caught in the predicament of the writer as we have now been defining it for a

number of pages, but also because he was still married to Cinina. True, writing *may* have helped him make up his mind to divorce her, but he would have remained miserable had he not acted. And then, he was fortunate to meet Eleanor Clark. In the *Mariner* essay, Warren makes the following statement: "What A. E. Powell, in *The Romantic Theory of Poetry*, says of Wordsworth, that he lived his philosophy long before he phrased it, is equally true of Coleridge . . ." ("Pure Imagination" 226). What we could say of Warren is the opposite: he phrased his philosophy before he lived it. The philosophy appears in the two great masterpieces of the drought period, *All the King's Men* and *Brother to Dragons*. However, *joy* does not become an important part of Warren's works until he has divorced Cinina and married Eleanor. Then, he can say, as he says in *Brother to Dragons*, ". . . I have made new acquaintance with the nature of joy" (209). And it is not *writing* that brings about this joy; it is the same force that flung a piece of coal into Warren's left eye now steering Eleanor into his ken.

Yet another guilt Warren could not write his way out of was the guilt he felt for having stolen, in a sense, his own father's dream of being a poet. Mariner-wise, he told and re-told the story of how, as a boy, he found a vanity publication with some of his father's poems in it and how, when he confronted him with it, his father wordlessly took it from him and he never saw it again. As Blotner says, summarizing this aspect of Warren's obsession with the father, ". . . even near the end of his life he would record emphatically his strange sense of guilt, as a successful poet, for having somehow appropriated the vocation his father had vainly cherished . . ." (Blotner 207). Every success only compounded his guilt.

In the end, what Warren says in the *Mariner* essay of Wordsworth also applies to Warren himself: "The imagination was for him a healing power, . . . [but] he did know something of the 'distress' associated with its exercise. In fact, like the Ancient Mariner and his creator Coleridge, Warren knew the 'agon' of creation and was much more the *poète maudit* than Wordsworth ("Pure Imagination" 260). Consider the testimony of literary agent Helen Strauss, for instance, who says that, with Warren, ". . . each work involved a protracted dredging of the soul and ruthless self-questioning" which resulted in a "'chaotic agony' of creation" (Blotner 237). Or simply consider the works themselves. They are clearly the creations of an artist for whom writing, particularly poetry, was not just, as Warren says, "a parlor trick even in its most modest reaches." Rather, they

are the creations of an artist for whom the act of writing was "bread and meat" (*Talking* 16, 131).

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# The Portrait

BY BEN JACQUES

I stopped for the hitchhiker on a high stretch of freeway just north of Tucson. It was a bad place to stop, but it was raining, the slow, persistent winter rain which can, in a good year, settle over the desert. Once Arizona was only a map, a place you had to drive through to get some place else. But now, having lived and worked in the desert, I felt at home with the expanse, the fading mountain ridges, and the thin vegetation: ocotillo, cholla, greasewood, palo verde. As I drove, I was lulled by the inclines and declines, noticeable more in the slight variations in the speed of my '53 Plymouth than in actual visual perceptions—as if my speedometer contained the shifting bubble of a surveyor's transit.

The hitchhiker ran up by my car and looked in. Thin, a little over five feet, he had a weathered face, protruding ears and a slight chin. Water dripped from short-cropped hair onto his forehead. He wore a grey jacket and jeans. His dark eyes searched mine for a moment, then he opened the door and got in.

"Thanks," he said.

"No good walking in the rain," I offered, switching open the heater vent.

"That's right."

"Where are you headed?"

"Yuma. You go to Yuma?"

"Yes."

"Good," he said, then, "My name is George. My Indian name is Bull Coming."

"Benjamin," I responded, smiling at the image of his name.

"Benjamin," he said, sounding my name.

We drove on. The hood of my car was a pale shiny blue, matching the distant mountains which disappeared into the cloud layer. The closer hills held a faint tinge of green. Along the highway and in the median scattered bright yellow bits of desert marigolds. A thin spring grass was just shooting up beside the blue asphalt.

"Live in Yuma?" I asked.

"I'm a sign painter. I'm going to Yuma to paint signs for a while. I have my brushes in my bag." He patted the canvas bag at his feet. "I paint for stores. I paint pictures, too."

George talked animatedly of his art, lifting his right hand and fingers and moving them in rapid strokes as he talked. Sitting back against the high, worn seat, he lined up his eyes behind his imaginary brush. "That's how I paint," he grinned.

At Picacho Peak we stopped for coffee. In the cafe the waitress filed her nails behind the register. Western paintings and artifacts were hung on the walls. We slipped into a booth by the window. The waitress brought us coffee. She avoided looking at George.

George looked at the artwork on the walls. "I sold a painting once to Governor Montoya," he said. "He came to a fair where I had my pictures. He has it in his house."

I stirred my coffee and relaxed. I felt in no hurry. The cafe was warm and dry and we could hear the trucks on the wet pavement outside. I got up and dropped a quarter in the juke box.

"I'm going to San Diego for a week," I said. "Then I'm coming back to go to the University in Tucson." As I said this, I felt the return of an uneasiness. I wasn't sure what I really wanted to do. I had been out of school for several years.

George said, "I went to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. But I didn't like it much. My sister said to me, 'Go to school. There is money for Indians who want to go to school.' So I went and I got a room. But I didn't like it. The teachers didn't care about what I liked. They said, paint this, paint that." He talked softly. "I got kicked out for going to class drunk. I couldn't help it. I would walk on that big campus and nobody would talk to me. Some Christian students got me to come to their group. They told me to pray to Jesus when I felt lonely. I would go to my room and pray to Jesus. Then I would drink."

I turned my eyes away from George and looked at the rain on the window, rivulets of water finding their way down the glass, blurring the desert beyond.

I paid and we got back in the car.

"Now it's better," he said. "Now I can walk out in this beautiful world and I don't feel so lonely. Sometimes I walk all the way between towns. I am a Navajo. I can paint." George again pretended he was making brush strokes.

We rode in quiet for a long while.

The rain stopped and the clouds lifted so you could see the distant mountains shifting their shoulders slowly as we moved. Checking my gauges, I caught sight of the tiny, gold, plastic emblem set in the horn-cap of my steering wheel: the Mayflower on its way to a new Plymouth.

At Gila Bend I stopped for gas. George went inside. I filled the tank and checked the water and oil. When I went in to pay, I watched George pay for a pint of Thunderbird and drop it inside his jacket.

After we had driven a few miles, George took the green bottle from his jacket. Then he slumped down on the seat until his head was below the level of the window. He held the bottle up and drank it in one pouring without taking swallows. Then he sat up again, capped the bottle and put it in his bag. He took out a sketch pad and pen.

"Now I will draw you a picture," he said.

He propped the sketch pad against his knees. His lines were dark and steady. When he finished, he signed his name, Bull Coming. Then he carefully tore the sheet from the pad and handed it to me. Glancing at it as I drove, I complimented him and thanked him. He sat back and closed his eyes.

I was lost in my thoughts when George started singing. It came up in his throat and head, almost inaudible, then increased until he was singing without constraint. The sounds were a flowing of high vowels.

"That is a Navajo song we sing at the camps. My father taught me. Should I sing another?"

"Sure."

As he sang, I drove without conscious effort, the car slowing in its long line on the immense land. I sensed in the sounds and in the cloud-subdued earth an unspoken familiarity. I felt I was approaching a point, not of return, but from which I could see openings in the forms of life, the spaces within. Looking into these spaces, I felt

acutely lonely. But I also sensed a refuge. I would recognize this feeling later in its absence, as I moved among men sophisticated and subtle, men who passed without shaking hands, who rarely looked you in the eye.

Then we were over the last rise and down into the irrigated valley of the Rio Colorado. We passed a runway and a strip of motels. Before we reached the river, George touched my arm lightly with his hand.

"Here is good," he said.

I stopped. The Navajo got out, closed the door softly, and with a slow composure walked down a side street.

Twenty-five years have passed. Today, going through my old notebooks, I found the drawing George Bull Coming made for me. It's a profile of a warrior: high cheek bones and forehead, sharply-lined eyes, strong nose, defiant chin. Long hair is tied in an ornamental band. Two feather tips fall forward on one side.

Now I can see what I couldn't see before, that it's a self-portrait. A self-portrait born of rain and wine.

# William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal": A Folklorist's View.

BY MARY ELLEN COHANE

A slumber did my spirit seal  
I had no human fears  
She seem'd a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years

No motion has she now, no force  
She neither hears nor sees  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course  
With rocks and stones and trees

William Wordsworth wrote this little poem while he was in exile from his poet friends, freezing in a poorly heated house in Goslar, Germany during one of the coldest winters of the century (Reed 45, 58). The meaning of this poem to a folklorist depends on the circumstances of its performance within a particular communicative community. Some communities included Wordsworth, and so part II of this paper includes more information about him. The two sections of the paper that follow are folkloristic interpretations of the poem as Wordsworth performed it in each of two different communicative contexts: when he entitled it "Epitaph" at the time of its

composition, and when he recast it as a "Poem of the Imagination" for the 1815 edition of his collected poems.

Some communicative communities in which this poem is performed, however, tend not to count Wordsworth as one of their numbers, and are divided about considering biographical details of Wordsworth's life in their consideration of his poem. One of these groups, a network of contemporary literary critics, is considered in part I and in the conclusion of this paper, where some implications of folklore theory for literary practice are considered.

## I. The Critics

Ever since F.W. Bateson and Cleanth Brooks published contradictory theses about the meaning of "A slumber did my spirit seal," this poem has served as a proving ground for new literary theories. In the last half century, such luminaries as Karl Kroeber, E.D. Hirsch, Francis Ferguson, Michael Riffaterre, Paul de Man, and Geoffrey Hartman have argued for different interpretations of the poem. By 1982, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels were using this poem to declare all theory dead: since then, Gerald Graff has used it to declare that we must accept indeterminacy as its ultimate meaning, only to have Brian Caraher write a two-hundred-and-seventy page book developing a new interpretation of the poem as a "Lucy poem." (And then Mark Jones wrote a book proving that there is no such thing as a "Lucy poem.")

The central problem is the tension, first, between the New Critical idea that the precise meaning of the poem can be determined by a careful examination of the poem itself, and, second, the fact that no one can agree on anyone else's precise meaning. Graff's conciliatory notion that the difference between careful interpretations of the poem is itself an interpretation has proved unsatisfying. Critics now say things such as "The indeterminate circumstances of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' are a characteristic feature of Wordsworth's modernity; we work against the poems if we try to unravel them at the expense of responding to the 'feeling therein developed'" (Williams 103). Yet how can we respond to the feeling therein developed if we can't figure out what it is? How are we supposed to feel about a "sealed" spirit, the "human" fears, or the seemingly feminine "thing"? Why does a poet who professes to love the speech of common folk

choose to use the seemingly pretentious term "diurnal"? How are we supposed to feel about this "she" being rolled around inside the earth? There is an exclamation point, so it must be a strong feeling—but what is it?

Folklorists would want an answer to this question, but not the one "right" answer. Rather, we are interested in how this poem has meaning as expressive culture within a particular speech community, a community much smaller than the sorts of communities usually inferred in literary criticism. Instead, we would ask about particular cases in which an individual took responsibility for performing this poem for a community of people small enough so that face-to-face interaction would be possible.

Given that literary critics might qualify as such a community these days, I will discuss some of the performances of the poem they have enacted.

A prime "informant" for our investigations into norms for creating meaning when the poem is performed in the literary community would be Jonathan Culler. Culler has served in the past as a guru of literary theory, explaining every thinker from Levi Strauss to Derrida to his community. When he spoke recently to a gathering of literary critics at Harvard, Culler said that we need to have some kind of theory of interpretation in order to understand the implications of such things as constitutions and laws and sexual harassment, for example, but we have none (1997). He said that the strongest and most recent contender for evaluating meaning in texts, "cultural studies," has splintered into interest groups. These groups emphasize such things as queer studies, postcolonial studies, or race theory, and tend to lose their focus on texts while negotiating the impossible tangles of material that make up cultural contexts.

Literary critics are not used to making their way through endless cultural context. Yet, if the meaning of the text is determined by its enactment in performance, we can limit our attention to the conventions about communication relevant in the communicative community for whom that text is performed. (This is what folklorists do.) Furthermore, folklorists have borrowed from sociolinguistic theory ways to figure out what few conventions of making meaning are most important in a particular context. This method is outlined at length by Dell Hymes in his *Foundations of Sociolinguistics*, but for our purposes it is only important to know that it is a kind of general



hermeneutics of how to take local hermeneutics into account. In other words, it is a method for deciding which of the following aspects of communication are most important in a particular case: the setting of the performance, the persons involved, the performance event itself, the function of the performance, the emotional key involved, the instrumentalities of words, sounds, or other artistic means employed, the norms of interpreting this sort of performance, and its genre. In this case, given the critics' fifty year preoccupation with the tone of this poem, it is clear that the key of the poem is important in their communicative community: in addition, the general confusion as to the generic identity of this poem shows that is also important.

Since literary critics tend either to defer to the author's intentions, or to refer derisively to the fact that other critics foolishly defer to the author's "intentions," I am going to begin by discussing the meaning of the poem in the context of its composition, when Wordsworth called it an epitaph, in the context of the life of its author and immediate audience, William Wordsworth.

Folklorists, I should warn you, are not afraid of committing "the intentional fallacy." It is partly because we believe we cannot know the depths of Wordsworth's unconsciousness, much less his unconscious intentions, any more than we can entirely know our own, and so we limit our scope in biography. (In addition, particularly in the past thirty years, we have taken to sharing our biographies with the subjects of our work while we are living with them and their friends; this also has given us a tradition of caution.)

We are particularly interested in the public evidence of the way performers learn and use and change conventions to suit their purposes, but only insofar as they are successful in teaching their audiences to accept these new practices. We would therefore consider including Wordsworth's communicated intentions about the meaning of his work, intentions expressed in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, and in letters to members of his artistic community, if Wordsworth's communicative community showed signs of accepting these ideas. (And they did.)

In this case, Wordsworth's writings about his art reveal an emphasis on emotions similar to that of the literary critics of our time quoted above, and of the poetry readers of his time who were caught up in the celebration of sentiment sometimes called "a cult of sensibility."

Wordsworth, for example, in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, writes that "the feeling therein [that is, in the poems] developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling" (73). In addition, just before Wordsworth wrote "A slumber did my spirit seal" in Germany, he wrote that what he wanted to learn most about the German language was the unique set of emotions with which the language is infused: he wanted to enter a state of mind in which "the several German idioms and phrases without any thought or considerations should immediately excite feelings analogous to those which are excited in the breasts of the natives" (de Selincourt 219).

Wordsworth's concerns match current anthropological theories about feelings, which find that all complex emotions are cultural accomplishments, not natural endowments. Catherine Lutz, for example, characterizes emotions not as "unmediated psychobiological events" but as "cultural constructions made out of the raw materials of historically specific social experiences, received language categories and speech traditions, and the potentials of the human body" (210).

## II. William Wordsworth, Architect of Feeling

Wordsworth did not succeed in learning German idioms and feelings in Goslar during that cold winter of 1798. People were suspicious of the foreigner and his sister, the Wordsworths could not afford to entertain, and it was usually too cold to go outside. William and Dorothy had reason to shun the cold: their mother, Ann, had died of pneumonia when William and Dorothy were just eight and seven years old, after she slept in a cold, damp room while on a visit to London. A few years later, the children's father, John, died of exposure, while travelling on business for his boss, the much despised politician and landlord, James Lowther, after losing his way in a mist on a place called Cold Fell. John's death left the five Wordsworth children penniless, since Lowther owed four years' worth of back wages to William's father, but never chose to pay them.

Once orphaned, ironically enough, William and Dorothy experienced some of the happiest years of their lives. They were sent away to school in the Lake District, where they lived with a kindly country woman, and their teacher encouraged them to take long walks and to write poetry. During this time, they became acquainted with ancient

Celtic poetry which was all the rage: particularly James MacPherson's *Ossian*, a set of Fenian lays that dated from medieval Scotland and Ireland. These included many nature poems critical of Christianity, which inspired both Wordsworth's nature poetry, and his famous "half-atheism" (Kinsella 41 and Kinsella, n.p.).

Four years later, Wordsworth's uncle separated the pair, and sent William off to University, where William was supposed to prepare to become a Cambridge cleric. William generally ignored the studies prescribed for him, and spent his time reading popular literature and planning a walking tour of the Alps, which he took, on borrowed money, during the summer of 1791. Upon graduation, he borrowed some more money and went back to France, which, two years after the storming of the Bastille, was alive with plans for implementing a new republican order.

Wordsworth loved politics: his uncle's hatred of Lowther had schooled Wordsworth in factionalism from an early age. Now, he fell in with the moderate Catholics, and fell in love with one of them: a twenty-four year old woman named Annette Vallon. When Annette became pregnant with his child, Wordsworth offered his services to the Girondins, a moderate faction ranged against the anti-clerical Robespierre. Finally, around the time of the birth of his daughter, Ann-Caroline Vallon in December of 1792, as Robespierre systematically executed the defeated Girondins, and Wordsworth ran out of money, the young man retreated back to England.

Once there, Wordsworth's status as an unmarried father precluded him from the ministry, and his history as a defender of regicide barred him from political life, but his stories about France endeared him to his old friends. He found employment accompanying William Calvert to Northern Wales, and then took a job as companion to Calvert's brother, Raisley Calvert, who was dying of tuberculosis. Wordsworth took some time to write and publish poems about his travels and to make the acquaintance of the English radical, William Godwin, before he took another job as companion to a friend of Godwin's, Azariah Pinney, who was also dying of tuberculosis. Pinney left him a small inheritance when he died, which Wordsworth promptly lent to another young man who needed his help, Basil Montague, whose lover's death had left him the distressed and inept custodian of his own illegitimate son (also named Basil), then two years old. Montague arranged for William and Dorothy to live in his family's

country house in the Lake District rent-free, in exchange for caring for the little boy.

There in Bristol, the three of them lived on the dribs and drabs of money returned to them by Montague, supplemented slightly by Dorothy's sewing and selling white linen shirts, and on William's hopes for his poetry. The poems and shirts being slow to sell, William took on Azariah Pinney's son as a pupil, and taught him Greek and Latin, concentrating on the Roman epitaphs in classical collections, and then walking all over the countryside, looking at the epitaphs on English gravestones. They loved the long walks, and their little home: I imagine them as similar to an American back-to-nature family from the 1960s living on crafts and tutoring in the Vermont woods. (It was conventional at that time for unmarried sisters to live with their [married] brothers. Since Wordsworth was sort of married to Annette, the arrangement may not have seemed as strange to the radical brother and sister as it does to us and to their neighbors. Or perhaps there was incest; none of this is germane, however, to the performances of the poem considered here.) Before long, however, the pressure of the poetry writing, and/or the parenting of the toddler, or perhaps the cold of winter, led Wordsworth in 1796 to have a nervous breakdown. Wordsworth was saved by Dorothy and then uplifted by a new acquaintance: Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Coleridge had been depressed himself, having planned to start a new society in America with a friend named Robert Southey, marrying the sister of Southey's wife for this purpose, but finding their plans for utopian community as well as for utopian marriages impossible to execute. Coleridge survived by patronage and by opium (I think of him as a Ken Kesey type), until he met Wordsworth, who shook him out of his torpor by telling him stories of the Alps and the Revolution. Coleridge brought Wordsworth up to live in his subversive poets' commune further upcountry, to the country cottages of Alfoxden and Nether Stowey, where they were joined by Southey, the poet Charles Lamb, and, fresh from imprisonment for treason, the radical republican John Thelwell.

The friends discussed philosophy and folk music—especially the philosophy of the English epistemologist David Hartley and his forerunner, Bishop Berkeley. We know they discussed Spinoza because a clownish royal spy, hearing the discussion, reported that the poets were making fun of him by calling him "Spy Nosa." The

poets listened to ballads in kitchens and public houses as they were sung by ballad hawkers and country people in the lake district (Wordsworth *Prelude*, book 5, 207-210 and Friedman 271). They dreamed of taking the best of the folk art they found and transforming it into improved forms for a people's republic: that is, in Wordsworth's words, to "produce songs . . . supplanting partly the bad with flowers and useful herbs to take the place of weeds" (Friedman 271).

The friends supported each other's work, and prepared to publish a joint volume called *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Before their book came out, however, the Coleridges and the Wordsworths set out for Germany, Wordsworth said, in order to learn the German language, and make money translating German poetry. The real reason was perhaps because they were draft dodgers and radicals: they had to escape the draft as the Napoleonic wars developed, and they were in danger of being imprisoned on the basis of the reports of the aforementioned spy.

Coleridge loved Germany, and went to the University at Hamburg to study German philosophy. Wordsworth, however, couldn't afford to live in the city, and both his German and his philosophic background were inferior, so he withdrew to Goslar, where the living was cheaper, dragging a copy of Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, which contained several verses used as epitaphs, with him.

And so here he was, once again in exile, in the cold, pressured to write poetry, hounded by depression and chills, and thinking only of home: "A plague on your languages, German and Norse," he wrote, "Let me hear the song of the kettle" (Reed 154-56). But he wrote, and he wrote: most of the poems for the second volume of *Lyrical Ballads*, including a poem that began "A slumber did my spirit seal." This is the first performance of the poem that I will subject to folkloric investigation, a performance designed primarily as an exploration of his own feelings, and only secondarily, for Dorothy Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

### III. Epitaph

The untitled poem we call "A slumber did my spirit seal" was originally entitled "Epitaph." Coleridge transcribed the poem with this title when he wrote it out for Thomas Poole, and, in another

place, he praised it as a "Most sublime Epitaph" in a letter to Wordsworth (Bernhardt-Kabish 512). Before we discuss reasons why Wordsworth dropped this generic identification for the poem, we can begin by testing the poem against Wordsworth's own descriptions of the nature of epitaphs.

In his work, "An Essay Upon Epitaphs," Wordsworth wrote that epitaphic inscriptions should, above all, be sincere; furthermore, they should "give to universally accepted truths a path and an expression which shall re-admit them into the soul like revelations of the moment" (61). These universally accepted truths included, he wrote, the notion that "some part of our nature is imperishable."

In Weever's book *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, Wordsworth found a great source of conventional epitaphs expressing these sincere expressions of belief in the afterlife; beliefs that Wordsworth wished to recast in such a way as to enter the souls of his readers in a new way. Although most of these epitaphs are easily deciphered, the collection includes one epitaph as mysterious in its expression of belief, and in its tone, as "A slumber did my spirit seal:"

Here lyeth wrapped in clay  
The body of William Wray  
I have no more to say.

(Weever 410: Written by John Louekin for his  
apprentice in 1350.)

In this case, we have a reference to death that uses the same burial motif found in Wordsworth's second stanza. The attitudes expressed here towards death and resurrection are, unfortunately, as unclear as those in Wordsworth's lines, "Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees." Wordsworth's expressed intention in writing epitaphs, however, was that they be a recasting of conventional beliefs.

Most of the epitaphs recorded from country gravestones by Weever containing a burial motif more clearly express conventional Christian beliefs about death, burial, and the afterlife. The following epitaph is typical:

Richard Nordell lyeth buried here.  
Somtym of London Citizen and Drapier.  
And Margerie his wyf, or her progenie,

Returned to erth and so sall ye.  
Of the earth we were made and formed  
And to the erth we bin returned  
Have yis in mynd and memory  
Ye yat liven lerneth to dy  
And beholdyth here yowr destine  
Such as ye arne sometym weren we.  
Ye sall be dyght in his array,  
Be ye nere so stout and gay.  
Therefor Frendys we you prey  
Make you redy for to dey  
Yat ye be no for sin atteynt  
At ye dey of Judgement.

(Weever 413, n.d.)

As Mircea Eliade points out in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, the pivotal lines, "of this erth we were made and formed/ And to the erth we bin returned," are an echo of Christ's words that were traditionally repeated by priests as they marked the sign of the cross with ashes on the foreheads of their parishioners each year. Ash Wednesday began the forty days of Lent, during which Christians were encouraged to remember ritually Christ's death, and to contemplate their own. This contemplation was a mixture of solemnity and joy, since all knew that the forty days of Lent would culminate in Easter, when Christ rose from the dead. After a period on earth, Christ then was transported, body and soul, into heaven, an occurrence celebrated on Ascension Sunday. Christians were taught to expect that they would share in the experience of Christ: they would pass from lives full of trials and cares into a passive death from which, if they had striven to be free from sin, they would rise, body and soul, on the Last Day. This expectation of rebirth was symbolized with eggs and flowers, whose cyclical transformations into life from apparent death were commonly observed by the people.

Another conventional symbol of rebirth was the turning of night into day and back again, as in the following epitaphs from Weever's collection:

Like as the day his course doth consume,  
And the new morrow springth again as fast,  
So man and woman by Nature's costume,

this life to passe at last in earth are cast.  
In joy and sorrow, which here their time do wast,  
Never in one state, but in course transitions,  
So full of change is of this world the glory.  
(Weever 416. Stone of Robert Fabian, 1511)

This epitaph uses the image of the earth turning from day to night and back again, conflated with the image of the cycles of living things as a symbol of rebirth, an image that resonates with Wordsworth's notion of the earth's diurnal course that propels his subject into a new mode of existence, an image that indicates a tone of Christian acceptance and optimism in the face of death. Furthermore, the regular meter used in the Ash Wednesday sentiment: "Remember man that thou are dust/ and unto dust thou shalt return," and in the epitaph above is echoed by the regular rhythms of nature, where death and life, winter and summer, and darkness and light, replace each other in predictable rhythm. Just as the regular meter of poetry lends a pleasure to the sentiments it contains, so the predictable rhythms of the earth lend to humans a comfort and peace. In Christian traditions, as in Newtonian physics, the diurnal motions of the earth are beautifully benign.

In addition, Wordsworth's reference to "earth's diurnal course" points to a connection between soothing poetic meter and the rhythms of Nature, if one takes into account a particular meaning that "diurnal" carried with it in Wordsworth's time and region: "A diary, or daybook" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Just as a poet inscribes sentiment into meter, so Nature inscribes her perceivable self into a great poem in her immense rolling rhythms. For a human being to become inscribed in "earth's diurnal course" as are rocks and stones and trees is, therefore, for a human to become part of a great peaceful poem.

And yet, if the poem is so positive in tone, it seems odd that Wordsworth would fill it with negatives, and pack it with loss: "no motion has she now/ No force." Cleanth Brooks's reading of the poem as one of shock and horror is not, after all, without grounds. The poem even seems to break Wordsworth's own prescriptions that epitaphs, unlike elegies, may mention only the sorrows of the mourners that are "directly excited by a distinct and clear conception of the individual who has died" ("Essay Upon Epitaphs" 33). We do not, however, have any distinct and clear conceptions of the dead "she" in



this poem. This has led critics to find "A slumber did my spirit seal" to be only half epitaph at best, since the first stanza seems so much concerned with the survivor's own feelings about his misconceptions of his "she" as immortal (cf. Hartman *Poetry* 168).

"A slumber did my spirit seal" does, however, fit perfectly into Wordsworth's description of a particular subset of epitaphic poetry that uses the figure "prosopopeia." In this kind of epitaphic poetry, as Wordsworth describes it, the speaker is made to "impersonate the deceased, and represent him as speaking from his own tomb-stone. The departed Mortal is introduced telling you himself that his pains are gone; that a state of rest is come; and he conjures you to weep for him no longer. He admonishes with the voice of one experienced in the vanity of those affections that are confined to earthly objects," and directs your attention to more lasting ideas.

The departed mortal here is Wordsworth himself; it is no surprise that he imagined himself dead, given the deaths of his parents and his friends as he shivered through the frigid winter in the poorly heated house at Goslar (Reed 45, 58). That Wordsworth felt the cold is evident in his poem "Written in Germany on one of the Coldest Days of the Century," in which he compares himself to a freezing fly. In addition, Dorothy writes extensively about Wordsworth's feeling ill in Goslar, with mysterious pains about his heart (de Selincourt, 236). Furthermore, Wordsworth wrote an epitaph for himself ("A Poet's Epitaph") during those months of isolation.

"She" in the poem refers, then, not to a woman from another poem, but to the poet's own spirit, here characterized as female. Indeed, Wordsworth often refers to his own soul, mind, and spirit as feminine entities. In Book II, line 316 of "The Prelude," for example, Wordsworth writes about his own soul as "remembering how she felt, but what she saw/ Remembering not." In Book XIII, lines 365-66 read as follows: "Each man's Mind is to herself/ Witness and judge." In addition, Book XIV, lines 228-29 read: "My soul too, reckless of mild grace had stood/ In her original self too confident." Again, Wordsworth uses the feminine pronoun for the soul when he writes in his "Essay Upon Epitaphs" that the soul travels until "she is brought back . . . to the land of transitory things . . . of sorrow and of tears" (124).

Understanding the poem as a prosopopeic epitaph, as Wordsworth first designed it, governs its interpretation for the poet in the situation when he first wrote the poem, and for the people with

whom he shared it as an "epitaph": Dorothy Wordsworth and Coleridge. In this manifestation of the poem, Wordsworth used traditional conventions as he did the language of common people: he referred to them, so as to raise their expectations that they might interpret his poem as they would a commonplace example of the genre, and then he frustrates their expectations slightly, in order to produce authentic emotions in them; that is, to "readmit" traditional belief and feelings "into the soul like revelations of the moment." What follows is a close reading of this performance of the poem.

"A slumber," the poem begins, "did my spirit seal." The speaker here is using "slumber" as it was conventionally used in gravestone epitaphs: it is a euphemism for death (as in, for example, "My flesh shall slumber in the ground" (Sortore 48). In his own essay on epitaphs, Wordsworth again uses sleeping as a euphemism for death: "death as a sleep overcoming the tired wayfarer" (125). Wordsworth also refers to—and pointedly avoids—the commonplace formula of slumber "stealing" upon the weary (see, for example his "a slumber seems to steal" in "Lines Written in Early Youth"). Instead, the slumber "seals" the spirit in a way that is only explained in the second stanza: she is cut off, or sealed away from the experience of earthly objects through the bodily senses of sight, hearing, motion, and touch. The speaker has passed through death, finding it as gentle as slumber, and reports that he felt no fears that his spiritual self might be as mortal as his human body: hence, no "human fears." Instead he reports that she seems to him to be an immortal thing (and spirits, like souls and minds, are conventionally referred to as things), who cannot feel the passage of time.

In the second stanza, the dead speaker describes the inaccessibility of "earthly objects" to the spirit, which cannot see, hear, or touch them. This is not, however, a lament for the loss of his perceptions of these objects. It is, instead, an admonishment to those people, whom Wordsworth mentioned in "*An Essay Upon Epitaphs*," "whose affections are confined" to such objects, to think about the possibility of higher forms of attachments with creation.

In addition, Wordsworth stresses the joyful nature of this new state by making a play on our expectations about the emotion death should elicit. He refers to, but avoids, the old formula "she neither sees nor hears" and its traditional match "with sorrow and in tears" although he himself had used this formula in other places. In the

quote above, for example, the soul "is brought back to the land of transitory things—of sorrow and of tears" ("Essay" 124). Here, however, Wordsworth begins by switching the senses in the first line to "She neither hears nor sees," and completes it, not with a reference to transitory emotions, but with a transcendental experience: "Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course/ With rocks and stones and trees!" In other words, instead of carrying about a sensing human body occupied with perceptions of transitory things, this spirit is now being moved by the rhythms of the larger vessel that is the earth itself. Yet, she is not experiencing a loss of free will or of control. Instead, the living spirit finds that her motion is now joined to the diurnal rhythms of the earthly sphere that includes all natural things: rocks and stone and trees. This natural abode is not a limited one; it is instead, as the popular seventeenth century theologian Paley suggested, the very essence of God.

Wordsworth, therefore, in exile from his country and his friends, failing at his aim of learning German philosophy and German poetry, short of money, and fearful of the cold, wrote "A slumber did my spirit seal" while imagining his own death. His reasons for hiding the identity of the deceased and the genre of the poem were several: Wordsworth later declared that prosopopoeic epitaphs were inferior to those written by friends of the deceased. Furthermore, Wordsworth had already written an epitaph for himself, and he was understandably reluctant to be accused as he had been of being self-centered. Most importantly, Wordsworth knew that the complexity of his newly scientific explanation of a transcendent union with God could be understood only in light of his concept of the imagination, a concept that had its source in the epistemological psychology of the English philosopher, David Hartley. For that reason, for his later poetry collections, Wordsworth classified the poem as a "Poem of the Imagination."

#### IV. A Poem of the Imagination

Wordsworth discusses imagination in Book 14 of *The Prelude*, writing that it "in truth/ Is but another name for absolute power/ And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,/ And reason in her most exalted mood" (189). In this passage, however, Wordsworth praises imagination more clearly than he defines it. The meanings behind his

panegyrics are rooted in the thinking, not of the German philosophers whom he had hoped to study, but of the English philosopher Hartley, whose work had inspired Wordsworth and Coleridge just before they left for Germany. Coleridge, for example, in a letter to Southey written in 1794, wrote that he considered himself "more Hartleyian than Hartley himself" (Huguelet xvii). And Coleridge, as he was apt to do, named the son who was born to him while he was enamored of Hartley's philosophy Hartley Coleridge.

Unlike Coleridge, who was successful in learning German philosophy during the trip, Wordsworth, isolated, lonely, and homesick, kept his thoughts on English philosophy as well as on English ballads (c.f. Brett and Jones xxxiii and xxxiv). Of course, it is unclear how much of Wordsworth's understanding of Hartley was filtered through what Coleridge called his "more-Hartleyian" interpretations and how much was bent by Wordsworth's own philosophical proclivity (Huguelet, xvii). Nevertheless, much in Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, much in his letters and much in the poems themselves reveal close correspondence to Hartley's *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, particularly, Wordsworth's idea of imagination.

In this book, Hartley defines imagination as one of a set of mental powers, all ultimately derived from sensations of natural objects. Through sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, he reasoned, aspects of external objects are communicated to the brain, where they are received as "simple ideas". When we are young, we are able to experience directly the sensations we receive from nature; some persons who are usually attentive to nature may be able to hold on to this relatively direct way of experiencing the world through their adulthood. Sooner or later, however, most sensations are accompanied willy nilly by a set of "associated remembered emotions" (28). A hillside, for example, will conjure up in us memories of other times in which we have seen similar sights, associations with other things from these experiences, and with how we felt during these earlier times, and how we now feel about our earlier experiences and feelings, and so on, until the hillside becomes obscured by our personal associations. As Hartley puts it, "when the pleasure or pain attending sensations and ideas is great, all the associations belonging to them are much accelerated and strengthened . . . for the violent vibrations excited in such cases, soon over-rule the natural vibrations,

and leave in the brain a strong tendency to themselves, from a few impressions" (22). The hillside itself is now almost beside the point. In this process, which he calls imagination, "ideas, and trains of ideas, occur, or are called up, in a vivid manner, and without regard to the order of former actual impressions and perceptions" (iii). Hartley, surprisingly enough, exalted this process, saying that "The Pleasures of Imagination are the next remove above the sensible ones, and have, in their proper place and degree, a great efficacy in improving and perfecting our Natures" (244). Wordsworth, as I will show, shared Hartley's sentiments about all this: in, for example, his evaluation of imagination as "clearest insight" and "amplitude of mind."

Hartley, unlike Wordsworth, did rank another mental process, that of the "generation of social, moral, and religious affections"—that is, the personal experience of these truths—above that of imagination. Wordsworth conflated these two states for two reasons: first, because imagination is the realm of poetry. As Hartley put it, "we think in words; both the Impressions and the Recurrences of Ideas will be attended with words; and these words from the great use and familiarity with language, will fix themselves strongly in the fancy" (376). In addition, Wordsworth thought that poetry had the power to generate social, moral, and religious truths, by expressing the effects of perceptions and ideas on human sensibilities in words that could shape the ideas of the future.

Wordsworth records his own transition from direct sensation to imagination—from experiencing Nature to writing about her—in "Tintern Abbey" (another "Poem of the Imagination") which he wrote just before he left England for Germany.

Wordsworth begins by describing how, five years before, his mind had been in a state of perception: when the sound of the mountain springs, and the sight of the woods and fields, orchard tufts, and pastoral farms had come to him unmixed with obscuring associations. He writes: "They had no need or a remoter charm/ By thought supplied/ Or any interest Unborrowed from the eye." The time of direct perception of nature, however, "is past . . . all the coarser pleasures of my boyish days . . . all gone by." Wordsworth has grown into another kind of mental power, and now the physical aspects of the site are half-obsured for him by emotional associations and memories.

Wordsworth does not mourn this replacement in himself of direct perception with imagination. Instead, he, like Hartley, feels that the

gifts of memory and imagination are "abundant recompense" for the loss of perception. In his new state of mind, Nature is only "the anchor of my purest thoughts," and both the ideas that are directly caused by her and those which the mind "half-creates" from perceptions altered by thoughts and associations, are equally pleasing to him.

Dorothy, however, is still in a state of perception. Her brother writes: ". . . in thy voice I catch/ The language of my former heart, and read/ My former pleasure in the shooting light/ Of thy wild eyes." Her ability to perceive nature directly will also change in time, as nature leads "from joy to joy":

. . . and in after years,  
. . . these wild ecstasies shall be matured  
Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind  
Shall be as a mansion for all lovely forms,  
Thy memory be as a dwelling place  
For all sweet sounds and harmonies.

Wordsworth's use of the metaphor of the mansion here is an allusion to the Christian idea, stemming from Christ's words "In my Father's house there are many mansions," which was interpreted as meaning that those who experienced God in heaven would know Him according to their varying capacities. (This was the idea amplified by Milton in creating his various levels of ascension in paradise.) This metaphor is quite in keeping with Hartley's theory of "theopathy," an idea (similar to Paley's) by which God is seen as inscribing Himself in Nature, to be read there "either in an explicit and distinct manner, or in a more secret and implicit one" by those who contemplate His works (Hartley, 420). The development of imagination, for Wordsworth as for Hartley, meant a capacity for a fuller experience of God unmediated by the senses; an experience of a "presence" he is able to feel with

. . . a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
A motion and a spirit that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

This is the same godly spirit that impels Wordsworth's soul, full of thoughts, unencumbered by sights or sounds, "in earth's diurnal force/ With rocks and stones and trees."

Wordsworth experiences this spirit yet again in another Goslar poem called "Influence of Natural Objects in Calling Forth and Strengthening the Imagination in Boyhood and Early Youth." Here, Wordsworth remembers skating along the surface of an icy stream and then stopping suddenly, only to find that "the solitary cliffs/ Wheeled by me—even as if the earth had rolled/ With Visible motion her diurnal round." Those who remember whirling around in circles as children to get this same feeling of the earth as it turns know that such awareness only comes when our eyesight and hearing are lost in a dizzy blur. Once again, the sublime is identified with the rolling movement of the earth, which is only experienced in a moment when the senses are kept from ordinary perception: "Thou Soul, that art the Eternity of thought!/ And giv'st to forms and images a breath/ And everlasting motion!" In the same way, Wordsworth's "spirit," freed of mundane perceptions, feels herself "roll'd round in earth's diurnal course," a situation Wordsworth infuses with a metaphysical joy matured by thought into a "sober pleasure."

The symbolic death of perceptions, and the occurrence of death itself are conflated in a third poem from Goslar, "The Boy of Winander"—another "Poem of the Imagination." This boy entwines his own voice with that of nature in a jocund din, but he still has the capacity to hear nature's voice directly, as "with a gentle shock of mild surprise," he finds that the sound of mountain torrents is being carried straight into his soul. The perceiving child, the speaker tells us, is dead: on his grave stands his transformed self: the poet, who builds his mind and his poetry on the basis of the perceptions he once experienced in mute tranquility. The poet stands, perhaps able, again, to hear the sound of rushing water, but that sound is now obscured from him by his memories and associations about his childhood experience of that sound; memories and associations that have become, for us, a poem.

A similar image occurs in another poem written in Goslar: "A Poet's Epitaph." Here, the dead poet addresses six types of men who might pass by his grave: politicians, lawyers, scholars, soldiers,



physicians, and moralists. All these are asked to pass by his grave quickly (except for the soldier, who might stay should he leave his sword aside, and once more "lean upon a peasant's staff"). The seventh passer-by resembles the poet himself before the full growth of his imagination: like Lucy he is modest and retiring; and like the Boy of Winander, he is acutely aware of natural objects; and yet he is already able to shut his eyes to nature and turn a quiet eye into "his own heart." The dead poet invites the young man to draw strength from his grave; to rest upon it, or even to build a house there. The words of his epitaph, carved into natural stone, have the means of carrying the boy into a higher life of imagination, giving him words with which to lose his perceptions, and to shape his imagination. The symbolic death of one's ability to perceive nature directly is only a precursor to actual death, which is nothing but an entry into a higher realm of imagination. As Hartley put it, "death, or the shaking off of the gross body, may not stop our progress [in knowing God], but rather render us more expedite in the pursuit of our true end. . . . Ultimate happiness appears to be of a spiritual, not corporal nature" (28).

Interestingly, the poem with which Wordsworth replaced "A slumber did my spirit seal" in what scholars have called a group of "Lucy" poems, in later editions of his collected poems, has a similar motif. In "I travelled among unknown men," Lucy's death has the effect of transforming the speaker's perceptions of his home county when he was absent from that place, sitting in Goslar by a scanty cold fire: yet his experience of England in his imagination was one of a higher, poetic nature. The poem that precedes "A slumber did my seal" in the 1815 edition, "Three years she grew in sun in shower," also makes a new kind of sense in the context of Hartley's philosophy. The death of Lucy, that aspect of Wordsworth that can still experience nature directly, is once again a transformation of his perceptions of nature: "She died, and left to me/ This heath, this calm, and quiet scene." The language resonates with traditional beliefs: Nature has taken Lucy "to herself" just as God is conventionally said to take His Creatures "unto Himself" in order to experience His Presence unmediated by perception: the "shooting light" of Dorothy's wild eyes is a synecdoche for the action of all her senses. Lucy is also the perceiving aspect in Wordsworth who must die so that other forms of mental power might be born. The death of Wordsworth's sensing self in "A



slumber did my spirit seal" brings to birth his spirit's capacity to free thoughts from encumbering perceptions, and to attune them to the unmitigated poetic masterpiece that is God.

Wordsworth, like Hartley, was not rejecting religion as he tried to explain the death of perception and the growth of imagination in human experience. Instead, Wordsworth was finding scientific evidence that proved beliefs about death that Christians had traditionally held on faith. The great debate about whether Wordsworth was a pantheist or a Methodist misses the subtleties that affect the quality of belief in all thoughtful people, and especially in Wordsworth. Although Coleridge, early in their friendship, wrote that Wordsworth was "a republican, and, at least, a semi-atheist" (Harper 220), the evidence suggests that Wordsworth was drawn to the old tenets of Christian belief, and set about rationalizing them through the medium of Hartley's rational psychology (Brantley x, 144).

In this context, "A slumber did my spirit seal" is a poem about the transformation of experience, as the spirit is sealed away from direct perception into a new life of participation in the mind of God. The identity of "She" includes the iconic Lucy, the young Wordsworth, little Basil Montague, and all young people insofar as they are in a state of perception. The "human" fears are fears about the loss of childhood perceptions, and about death; fears that are transformed to a calm joy once the redeeming nature of imagination is understood. As Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude*, the loss of hearing, seeing, feeling is an entry into a new state wherein "sanctified by reason, blest by faith," the mind becomes

a thousand times more beautiful than the earth

. . . above this frame of things. . .

In beauty exalted, as it is itself

Of quality and fabric more divine.

As a "Poem of the Imagination," then, "A slumber did my spirit seal" explores a symbolic death: the death of direct perception that takes place as people accumulate memories and imaginative ideas. It was a triumph. Far away from the perception of lovely natural things, isolated from the universities full of philosophical speculation, Wordsworth achieved an artistic expression of these ideas that could make them alive for philosophers of perception, and that integrated them with Christian ideas. Wordsworth's immediate audience for the

poem was that little coterie of intellectuals who discussed Hartley with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and himself in those idyllic days in the Lake District, who could interpret the poem according to their shared knowledge of Hartley's philosophy. That immediate communicative community was expanded upon with Wordsworth's new labeling of "A slumber did my spirit seal"; now anyone schooled in philosophy who recognized the issues involved in questions of "Imagination" could be part of its interpretive community.

And so we see that the meaning of the poem, from a folklorist's point of view, depends on the circumstances of each performance of that poem. "A slumber" carries different images when it is seen as an epitaph than when it is seen as a poem of the imagination: it refers, in one case, to an imagined death, and, in the second, to a symbolic death and rebirth. Nevertheless, in both performances of the poem by William Wordsworth, its central tone remains the same: one of tranquil joy.

For some contemporary literary critics, these performances of "A slumber did my spirit seal" by its author are considered essential to interpreting the poem "correctly." Other critics see themselves not only unfettered by the cultural context of the poet, but living under postmodern conditions, where no one narrative is held sacred, and no one metanarrative lends guidance for interpreting that narrative. The realization that "A slumber did my spirit seal" has become a de facto sacred narrative for English-speaking literary critics is a beginning: next we can decide if we do, indeed, wish to become one communicative community, and only then choose interpretive conventions to govern our understandings of our expressive culture under the different sorts of circumstances in which it is performed.

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# Buying Eggs at the Half Way House

POETRY BY  
JAN MYSKOWSKI

The moon rolls onto the shoulder  
Of the ridge, the December  
Grasses, sheathed in frost,  
Glisten like fiber optics, transmitting  
The kinetic solar wind to be stored  
By the dormant roots

Peter lives in a half  
Way house with neat clapboards  
And a brown board barn, where,  
Retarded, he and the others  
Carry on a road side trade in  
Fresh eggs and painted bird  
Houses, advertised on plywood signs  
That bend when it rains

We first met Peter when  
New friends from church  
Helped us move and brought  
Their nephew along.  
I remember feeling ashamed  
Not wanting him to grab  
Boxes marked fragile

Whenever he sees us on the road  
He yells outrageously, "hello,"  
But he yells not to us as individuals,  
Not for us as the remembered,  
He yells the same at the attendant  
Standing numbly by—all day long

Once I saw him coasting  
Down hill on a bicycle,  
The spokes of the wheels  
Chasing themselves around the hubs,  
His arms rigid on the  
Bars, and his face  
Wrenched between ecstasy and fear

Another time I stopped for  
Eggs and my knock brought  
Him splashing toward the door,  
Through the glass I watched  
The attendant push him back,  
His arms still flailing and clutching

I'd like to believe that Peter  
Gathers the eggs we buy  
From the hutches himself, the  
Struggle must make his thick  
Lips tremble, and the chords and  
Tendons of his arm show as  
He restrains his fingers,  
I'd like to see those thin-shelled  
Successes come to rest in the cartons

The June grasses grow  
A green brighter than fire—  
Perennial, everywhere,  
Between the ruts in the wood road,  
From the cleft of a stone.

## Review

BY BONNIE BISHOFF

# At Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum: Looking For Myself In Hyperspace

**H**ere are my credentials. I am 54 years old. At the risk of sounding like a Forrest Gump wanna-be, I share the following: When I was about 10, growing up in Shreveport, LA, I sang a song in a talent show at Linwood Junior High with some other locals and a lanky, older teenager with dark, duck-tailed hair who sang with a hillbilly band (as they were called then) from Memphis and wiggled all over the stage. The audience roared with laughter at him and giggled about his funny name. My mother called him "seedy" and told me not to watch. But I did. I was a witness. At the very beginning, I was there.

With my 12th birthday money in 1955, I bought three 78s (those are big, plastic records): Pat Boone's "Ain't That a Shame," "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Hailey and the Comets, and Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti" (flipside: "Long Tall Sally"). My jazz- musician father had a fit. I can still sing every word of all of those songs. By the time I



was 13, I had discovered the black radio stations in Shreveport, and I was starting to listen to some real down-and-dirty rock and roll and some classic rhythm and blues. By the time I was 18, I was going to dances played by Cookie and the Cupcakes and Bo Diddley. By the time I was 21, the Beatles had crossed the Atlantic. By the time I turned an untrustworthy 30 in 1973, I could have written the book on rock 'n roll. I owned it!

So when I heard about the rock and roll museum in Cleveland, I was awestruck at the possibilities. The world of my youth—the soundtrack of my life—the snapshots of my soul were available to me and to future generations who could now experience what they had only seen on video until today. This would be the baby boomers' Tut exhibit. This would be our legacy to America—an environment celebrating the sound, rhythm, movement, and new definitions of freedom that defined half a century. I couldn't wait to get there. I expected to meet myself around every corner in this shrine to us. I was positively giddy about this long-awaited reunion with my youth in a field of dreams where Johnny and Ronnie and Jimmy and Joey and Billie and Betsey and Hatti Patti would welcome me back to a world of slow-dancing on dark patios, bottled Dr. Pepper laced with a hit of bourbon, Chantilly perfume and Old Spice cologne (later White Shoulders and Canoe), bopping barefoot to the music of Mickey and Sylvia on the wet paved floor of the city pool pavilion, requesting Jimmy Clanton songs on the radio and dedicating them to various secret crushes from a secret admirer. At Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum (America's second largest family tourist attraction after Disneyworld), I went looking for myself in hyperspace.

I couldn't find me.

Looking for self: what does one expect or hope to find? Well, in music—the soundtrack of a lifetime—specific times and places connected to songs define the significance of the music to an individual life. In the context of time and place, you can find yourself in the music that shaped your decisions and defined your emotional responses and accompanied significant moments that make your life your own. You should be able to find yourself in a museum dedicated to that music.

I couldn't find hyperspace, either—the fourth dimension: that parallel universe of highly subjective, compacted space-between-

words that surrounds objects—invisible and electronic, dense with possibility and populated with totally unique and private and unshareable images—an ocean of personhood teeming with developed and undeveloped forms of potential personal wisdom and awareness.

Now, there is certainly no way to evoke the REAL PAST—it is far too subjective an experience—but in hyperspace, concrete time and place are removed, and we are left with ourselves and an object in a vacuum. The only meaning is subjective memory in and of itself —wakening old, stored emotions and personal visions of yourself in a world only you experienced. But in this museum, objects and sound run together in such confusion that the white sound coupled with the white experience adds up to nothingness.

Let me begin at the beginning of this non-magical, unmysterious tour.

On a blustery January day, my friends and I set out to the lakeshore of Cleveland to at last get a peek inside of the four-story, gray, conical, stone and glass structure that is the rock and roll museum. We hardly noticed the ten-minute uphill walk from the nearest parking area. We had been encouraged to make reservations; our 10:45 admission time was at hand. Upon entering the building, we were immediately commanded by a no-nonsense guard to check our umbrellas. We then proceeded through the cavernous, sort of bus-terminal lobby—with its list of predictable but somehow stultifying no-nos and rules of behavior—to the dark entrance. Its portals resembled an old-fashioned movie theatre door. We could see neon possibilities glowing in the dark beyond us, beckoning us into a dream state—a dream date. Another, somewhat surly, watchman-usher demanded our wrists and slapped on thick plastic bracelets, so strong that we were later unable to rip them off by hand and equipped, I would guess, with a sensor that tracks patron movement and time spent in areas around the museum. A little creepy, but probably justifiable. I guess maybe I was expecting just a stamp on my hand, but hey!

We were then told in serious tones just which direction to take to proceed through the museum. Each of us, of course—in rebellious rock and roll mode by now—took off in his or her own direction to experience this adventure in our singular way. As it turned out, it didn't matter a whit which path we or anyone else took: this was all set up for traffic control—probably essential in the crowded days of

summer, but we were practically the only ones there that day! A sad little tone colored by the business-like rules had vaguely begun to rob us of our exuberance as we entered the dark hallways of Level One.

In the center of Level One, there is a cinema. It is divided into two sections. Section one shows "Mystery Train," a pretty good short film about the roots of rock in gospel, blues, country, folk, and fifties rock and roll—a little fragmented, but on the whole, well-made and worthwhile. Then the audience proceeds to the left (on command from an unseen voice) and enters a second cinema for part 2, "Kick Out the Jams," a chronicle of the rock and roll explosion in the fifties and sixties. This one is far from worthwhile: endless short clips of badly shot footage of bands in concert, juxtaposed with long, repetitious interviews with a handful of musicians. But at last one is sprung to proceed through the rest of the experience, free at last—or so I thought—from the humdrum of video screens and their predictable, limiting images.

In the exhibition areas of the museum, sections of the display are named and divided—though so subtly one is hardly aware of the changes—with such catchy titles as "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," "Come See about Me," and "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You"—all of which might be appealing if the section designations were identified and somehow really did set specific areas apart from one another. "Don't Knock the Rock" (the gateway into the displays from the early years) consists of fairly large graphic depictions of selected quotes from fearful opponents of the music from earlier times (such as, would you believe, Tipper Gore?) as well as large video screens showing footage of preachers and DJs ranting and raving and breaking old 78s. This area is the first of quite a few subtle and sometimes not so subtle disclaimers that keep turning up around the building, and that somehow send a subliminal message separating "us" from "them". The problem is that one is never quite sure whether the museum is on the side of "us" or "them"—or even which is which.

The densely overcrowded and dimly lit areas celebrating the early years add up to what can only be called a non-event—a crowded, dark, cold, colorless, rigid, soulless, incomplete, and unimaginative display of mostly disconnected artifacts: 8x10 glossies; occasional pieces of sheet music with marginal notes; some hand-written lyrics; old Cub Scout shirts and report cards of the stars (all crowded together in glass cases, many of them at floor level—bring your glasses and be ready to stoop, bend over, or kneel in order to read the endless

typewritten and handwritten documents on exhibit five feet below eye level); plus a few tie-dyed shirts from the sixties; a cape that belonged to Elvis; a hand-painted car that belonged to Janis; a wool hat that belonged to Dion; costumes worn by the Supremes and Michael Jackson modeled by four identical mannequins in gender appropriate wigs; and a virtual slew of old guitars.

Aurally, this exhibit is a nightmare. The hall is dominated by TV screens mounted everywhere: showing video snippets of information, snippets of concerts, snippets of biographies, all playing at a volume that prevents the listener/watcher from separating the audio of one sound track from another. Words and music come from all directions and create a din of white noise that evokes the feel of outer space, not hyperspace. There is absolutely no design to the sound or to the juxtaposition of one sound against another. Now randomness has its place (I remember happenings and "Paul is Dead" when you played the record backwards), but the random is out of place when it is inescapable, or when it is in no way spontaneous. Chaos theory requires live action, one-time hit-or-miss occurrences, humans making behavioral choices—it celebrates fate. In this museum (which exists to give homage to the sublime intervals of ordered sounds), the aural chaos profoundly frustrates all human attempts to distinguish one audio signal from another. It creates chaos out of order. Perhaps the strongest intrusion into any concentration I might have been able to develop, as I tried so hard to become one with this place, was the proliferation of fragmented videos and partial musical clips with which I was constantly bombarded. Publicity for the museum actually boasts of "the 96 monitor video wall of performance segments from a variety of artists." I've seen displays like that at Sears.

Surrounded by this gray hall of horror is an open space named "Let's Spend the Night Together." OK, how can you miss on this one? We're talking the Beatles and the Stones now. "Have you seen the psychedelic exhibit?" someone asks. Guess what: stage costumes, tie-dyed clothes, album covers, a few painted flowers on the floor, more and more and more guitars—and of course, the ever-present video screens. Not even so much as a black light. "If you remember the sixties, you weren't there," goes the old saying. Well, neither was the curator of this room. There is nothing more I can add except to say that I heard recently that the museum had received a significant contribution from The Who—more old drums, guitars, and speakers. And on April 3rd, 1998, CNN announced that the rock and roll

museum had added an entire new wing for video "rockumentaries." I rest my case.

On to the next area: more TVs showing endless video clips of the emerging psychedelic scenes in London and San Francisco, more concert performance clips, more bits of interviews—no one segment ever lasting more than a minute. A place to flee. But fleeing leads one into the arena devoted to fans—and yet more video! Videos of fans and fanatical behaviour, videos showing glimpses of the interaction between fans and performers—and worst of all, videos of interviews with fans. The only "real" visual in the area is the drumstick collection of some famous rock drummer, arrayed in a sunburst design.

Feeling a lot like Alice In Wonderland, I turned into the room of "One Hit Wonders" full of album covers, 8x10 glossies, tiny textual references, and available audio from computers—all featuring different performers and their one shining moment of fame. If they were lucky enough to have ever been on video, you can probably see it here. I wouldn't know. I was just passing through.

And so it continued—educational, perhaps, but barely interesting. Along the side halls of the museum, in the less "popular" settings, I found a few industrial rooms such as the one that shows the making of a song—full of yet more text, more audio, more photos. But at least free of those dreaded videos and their frenzied clips.

A very dark room full of shower stall listening areas and computers with ear phones enabled me to hear 500 songs that shaped rock and roll—most still fairly popular and easy to hear in modern TV commercials or on those specialty rock and roll albums available by phone—but none of the wonderful obscure stuff that would really knock your virtual bobby socks off and bring tears to your eyes if only you could hear them once more. Stan's Record Shop on Texas Street in Shreveport had old listening booths in which you could sit and listen to a record before you bought it. Wouldn't it be satisfying if there had only been one of those tucked in a corner here for those of us who might remember?

But it is not the specifics—or lack thereof—that are significant here. Nothing specific evokes the memories or jolts the psyche of every visitor. Yet an evocation of time and place is essential—a psychic space or shape with wormholes through which one can travel to reshape her own experience or his own relationship to the past—to gain insight, understanding, new perspective. But this is all exhibit;

no environment, no energy, no ghosts; random objects under glass and a plethora of video clips just don't do the trick. How can you find your self and your spiritual relationship with time in this dimly lit, gray hall of cold, inanimate memorabilia?

Up on Level 2, a video tree (!) presents the history of music videos from MTV (the eighties to the present). Another exhibit shows the impact of (what else?) TV on rock and roll; there is also an exhibit of video clips of the best 10 rock and roll films and video clips of some rock artists' favorite movies and a video about Alan Freed—and at last a stairway to Level 3 and fast food and natural light and pretty views of Lake Erie.

Level 4 and still searching: another cinema examining various aspects of rock and roll—we skipped it. And, then, kind of unexpectedly, we came across the only real installation in the museum—a recreation of The Wall in honor of Pink Floyd. Separate from the other exhibits (and one floor up from the snack bar), it is a three-dimensional structure with appropriate graffiti, strange figures, and words of confession and warning by Roger Waters about the dehumanization of performance. Indirectly lit by natural illumination, it is evocative, philosophical, and visually stimulating, compelling, and sophisticated. Offered in silence, it creates the strongest rhythms in the museum.

Rock and roll was huge, IS huge—but not one thing in this museum is physically, spiritually or psychically huge. Even the Hall of Fame is just small—tucked four stories up, prefaced in its outer lobby by a continuous showing of—yes—video clips from induction ceremonies and reached, popularly, by an endless, curving, almost completely dark, windowless, close and claustrophobic stairway that feels like something out of a haunted exhibit at some county fair. Somewhere there must be an elevator to access the Hall of Fame, but you would really have to look for it.

Once there, in a sort of playhouse-sized rotunda, your eyes finally adjust to the dark and you discover that the round walls are electronically displaying (in the tiniest images yet—literally snapshot-sized) the names and sometimes the faces of the honorees. You can't even make the rounds at your own rhythm, pace, and leisure. You soon discover that this electronic display is fading in and out at about the speed it takes my little old Mac to download the most extensive graphic presentations off the net. So if you walk up to the image of a star too late, it fades away and there is some real down time, while

you wait for Sam Cooke or whoever to reappear. If you are lucky enough to have the Hall of Fame and Sam Cooke's little display to yourself, you can actually get close enough to press your nose up against the black glass wall and read the tiny print beside Sam's tiny likeness. It's a space from which you absolutely cannot wait to escape.

All done. The track takes you by the gift shop on your way out: an ocean (a Dali painting) of literally thousands of unbought T-shirts packed into racks, dripping from floor to ceiling, and—appropriately—enough tapes and CDs to take your breath away. A shop, taking up a space bigger than any of the individual exhibits in the museum. The big picture grows clearer.

As we left the building, some ancient roadies were setting up a sound stage—oversize speakers and all—in the fairly small lobby. They were preparing for a 3 p.m. concert by some unknown group about to bombard this limited, walled space with yet more sound. We walked out into the cold rain and welcomed the fresh wet air and the quarter mile walk back to the car and the blessed, blessed silence.

The museum and its philosophy is very mainstream even as it represents a movement that is anything but. It seems to be unfinished—things are missing. With due respect, the planners do seem to recognize the problem—how to present this monumental era in “museum language”—but somewhere along the way, they missed the solution. The museum superimposes a cleanliness and a regime (even in its cone-like, circular design) that stands out in contrast to the grease and anarchy that it claims to celebrate. It makes rock and roll respectable. This is a safe place to bring the kiddies. It backs up the cover story you gave them about your past. It puts its own conservative spin on our history and how music has shaped it. Something significant has been lost, not found. The rock and roll museum and hall of fame is erasing, not adding to, our collective memory.

In all of the rock and roll museum, there is no recreation of real space—nothing to feel, touch or walk into. Not a breathtaking moment in the whole event—not once do you turn a corner or step across some threshold into a parallel universe. The many dark spaces seem just unlit—as if the authorities are conserving electricity. There is no lighting design to define areas or evoke atmosphere or underline significant points, perhaps because no one thing is given any particular significance. The museum could never be called a

hyperspace experience—an exploration of the space between words and notes connected by wormholes through the last forty years.

So, truth to tell, not only did I not find my self in the whorls of time and space I so passionately hoped to discover waiting for me there in Cleveland, I didn't find a museum either. The reality—the Rock and Roll Museum—is misnamed. A museum preserves the past for the present and future. In a museum, we should find treasures at every turn, wonders unavailable to us anywhere else in the world. A museum should provide moments of experience or re-experience, not just a collection of random relics—and most certainly not in endless rounds of constant, invasive video. The rock and roll museum creates no identifiable environment—no time, no place, no grounding experience—from which to say with confidence, "I lived then; and this is the truth of how it was."



# In a Seashell Box

POETRY

BY PAUL LESAGE

Should ever I get old I would save  
the last few hairs  
from my head and give them names  
like Fred and Alice and hide  
them in a seashell box  
so in the morning I could listen  
to them as they gossip about  
how old I'm beginning to look.

## Contributors

**Bonnie Bishoff** is a member of Actors Equity Association and has performed at regional theatres around the country, including the Kennedy Center, Tulane Center Stage, Commonwealth Stage and the Williamstown Theatre Festival. Favorite acting experiences over the years have included roles in *Blithe Spirit*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Sea Gull*, *Glass Menagerie* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Bonnie has also directed professionally for Williams College Theatre, the Williamstown Theatre Festival and Oldcastle Theatre Company. For many years Bonnie has taught and directed at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts where she is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts.

**Mary Ellen Cohane's** research is in the intersection of folklore and mythology with literary theory. She has written and presented numerous papers on literature, principally focusing on James Joyce. Her articles have appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* and *The New Jersey Folklore Quarterly*. Her story, "The Gift of the Falcon," for the Spring 1998 *Mind's Eye*, is part of a work in progress: one of five stories and a mummings play called *A Christmas Book*. Professor Cohane has taught in the English and Communications Department at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts since 1986.

In the vein of creative nonfiction, **Ben Jacques** has written essays and articles for numerous publications, including *Americas*, *Flyfishing*, *Country Journal*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Berkshire Eagle*. Since 1990 Professor Jacques has taught in the English and Communications Department at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.

**Paul LeSage** has taught composition and newspaper journalism for the English and Communications Department at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts since 1981. Professor LeSage has earned numerous awards in recognition of his teaching and has served as an editor-contributor to several publications, including *The Berkshire Eagle*, *Outpost Magazine*, *Optical Spectra Magazine*, and *Hilltown News*.

**Mark Daniel Miller** teaches creative writing, literature, and composition at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. He has published several articles on the life and work of Robert Penn Warren, and recently served as president of The Robert Penn Warren Circle. His poetry has appeared in *The New York Quarterly*, *The Pawn Review*, and elsewhere. From Texas, Professor Miller joined the English and Communications Department in 1986.

**Jan Myskowski** graduated from North Adams State College in 1987 where he majored in English. After receiving his law degree from William and Mary, Jan returned to North Adams where he has practiced law since 1992. Jan's poetry has also been published in the *Recorder*, a journal of the Alpha Chi national honor society.

# THE MIND'S EYE

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While emphasizing articles of scholarly merit, *The Mind's Eye* focuses on a general communication of ideas of interest to a liberal arts college. We welcome expository essays as well as fiction, poetry and art from faculty and guest contributors. We publish twice a year. The deadline for the Fall issue is July 15. Deadline for the Spring issue is January 15.

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